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ABSTRACT

In modern societies, children are becoming more and more users of a child culture constructed by adults, rather than producers of their own culture. This paper describes a project, implemented in Nordic child care centers and early childhood classes, that provides children the opportunity to narrate and illustrate their own stories, written down by educators and mailed to an exchange institution in their own or another Nordic country. The purpose of the project is to support children's own culture, increase children's interest in language, strengthen early childhood educators' competence about children's culture, and form the basis for expanded research in this field. In various countries, different components to the research are added: for example, in Denmark, researchers have analyzed stories and have observed the children in play to identify similarities in themes, problems, and solutions in stories and play. This paper discusses children's story listening at home and in day care settings in Denmark, the teacher's role in storytelling, the structure of children's stories, and the use of fairy tales. The analysis of children's stories and play indicates that general themes include power relationships, good versus wicked, attack and defense, and chase and run away. The paper notes that although children create a number of roles in play and stories, the description of context is often poor in stories. Contains 14 references. (KB)

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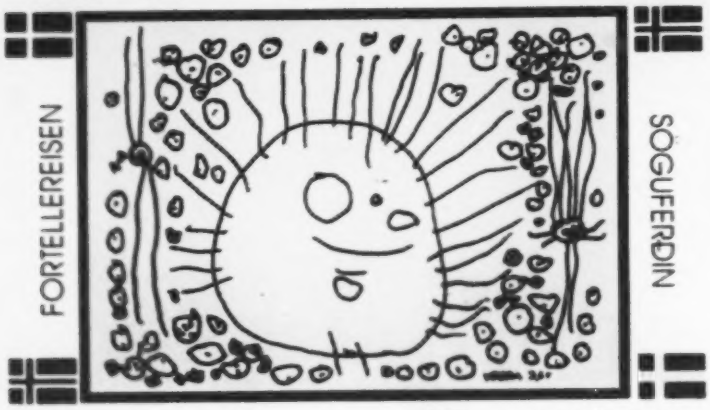

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CHILDREN'S STORIES AND PLAY

- Storyride - a children's culture project

8th European Conference on Quality in Early Childhood Education
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A developmental project

In the modern society people receive an ongoing stream of information, which can reduce the individual to a passive consumer of information, and not an active producer of knowledge and fantasy. This is also children's situation, - more and more they are user of child culture, and less they are producer of their own culture.

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In order to strengthen children's possibilities to be a constructor of own culture, from 1996 educators and researchers from the Nordic countries have carried through a culture project in a big amount of child care centers and schools: Sagofärden - that means "The History of the Storyride".

The children create their own stories, which the educators write down word by word, whereupon the adult read the story aloud, and the child accepts or corrects the story. Maybe the child make a drawing and sometimes write the story by use of his own writing - play writing. Finally the child and the adult pack the story and bring it to the post office in order to mail it to the children in their friendship kindergarten, an exchanges institution in their own country or in another Nordic country from which the children receive stories. At the moment all together about 3.000 stories are accumulated, among these about 400 are Danish.

First of all the *purpose* of the developmental project is to support children's own culture, and more to increase children's language interest based on the differences and similarities between the spoken and the written word.

The project is also supposed to strengthen the early childhood educators own competence around children's culture and to form the basis for expanded research in the field.

A research project

Parallel with the development activities Nordic researchers carry through different research projects: Monika Riihelä and Liisa Karlsson from Finland; Ingrid Pramling and Anna Klerfelt from Sweden; Stig Broström and Solveig Georg from Denmark; Åse Enerstvedt, Turild Fadnes and Kari Thurkildsen from Norway; Thora Kristinsdottir og Gudmundur Kristmundsson from Island.

In Denmark Solveig Georg and Stig Broström and educators from some day care centers analyze the received stories, and more observe the storytellers in play.

On the basis of knowledge on children's play it is hypothesized that there is some similarities according to the themes, problems and solutions in the children's stories and play.

Inspired of Sutton-Smith (1981) and Maranda & Maranda (1970) a temporary analyze of a number of stories and play sequences are analyzed according to the theme, the type, the structure, and the plot (se table 1). The analyze seem to show an identity between the child's way to construct a story and a role play.

Children listen to stories

Immediately at birth the child starts the process of enculturation. He or she receives and adapts a multiplicity of sense impression. The child observes peoples' interaction and listen to their verbal communication, and too he or she takes active part in the communication.

From very young age they meet the stories of the culture. In the case of Danish children about 80% will not only listen to stories in the family, but also in the day care center.

In many families the supper is the daily frame for children's and parent's social and emotional life. After having carried through the day's work in school, in day care center or at the workplace children and parents meet around the dining table. Here they plan the next day: how to share of the car, picking up children, shopping and planing what to do next week-end etc. In addition to this the meal is used as a platform for the family member's exchange of experiences, and here the storytelling is expressed. For example the mother tells:

> Now listen to what I experienced. Can you believe it, I had been shopping, both paste, milk, oranges and meat for sandwich for to morrow. With everything in the handlebar basket I raced through the

streets in order to pick up Anna in day care center. Then a car crossed my way, and brought me down. I lie with my nose in the street and the oranges rolled all over the street. I went mad, and just before starting to scold, Sofie's dad jumped out of the car asking: Was you hurt? He was so distracted and he apologized for his mistake. Well he was a figure of fun, and we both start laughing. We looked at my bike, the wheel was buckled. "Let's go to the bike-mender" Sofie's dad proposed, and then he throwed the bike at the top of the car, and off to the bike-mender we went...

When children are accustomed to listen to such stories, they become storyteller themselves. Mind you, only if parents and siblings make room for younger brothers' and sisters' stories.

However, not only the parent's own stories and reading pave the way for the children to be familiar with stories of the culture. They are also communicated through modern technology: television, video, CD-ROM computer and tape recorder. Through these media and Walt Disney's productions many children meet the Great Stories. Electronic mediation shall not be refused, but must not dominate the parents own stories. Parents own the very best stories, namely their own childhood. Stories filled up with funny, naughty and dangerous actions. Such life stories can be told again and again.

In day care center

Parallel with life in family most children enjoy life in day care center where the educators among other things help children to get access to the magic world of stories.

At least storytelling and reading of fairy tales was one important element which

forms the basis of the tradition of the Nordic day care centers. However an analysis of plans of activity (curricula) from 87 Danish day care centers shows that storytelling only was mentioned in 20% of the plans. And none of them described children's production of own stories (Broström, 1996). Yet it shall be mentioned, that a current debate on Danish children's poor reading abilities seems to wake an interest in and understanding of the importance of reading aloud and linguistic activities.

If storytelling has a low priority in Danish day care centers, the occurrence is rather widespread in the preschool class for 6 year olds in school. An investigation among 519 preschool classes shows, that storytelling was found every day in 85% of all classes, and in 15% of the classes several times during the week (Broström, 1997).

However, regardless of the extent of storytelling most children in a very young age are familiar with both some *elements of content* and *structures of storytelling*. This is illustrated through the four year old girl Sanne's story *The princess traveled by sea*.

> The princess got lost in the forest, she lost her brooch, the robber found her, the robber was not able to find his way. The king walked them home to the palace. The queen hold her little child in her arms and the princess got a little sister. Afterwards the king arrived, they had a little baby. Afterwards the queen went shopping sweets and chips, afterwards she returned. Afterwards her mum found her brooch. The princess married a prince. The princess send off her brooch for me, I got it from her. They traveled by sea because they would go and get some treasures from the pirates, sure they had so many, at the end they lived happily in the palace all their days.

Live and learn

The children pick up the content and the structures of storytelling through listen to storytelling, and too when they themselves produce stories. That is when they are involved in an environment of storytelling. You could also say, when the educator goal-directed tells stories, she creates a kind of teaching, which has fairy tales and stories as content.

Teaching can be defined as the educators' reflection and action with special reference to make it possible for the child to experiment with a topic, to communicate with both adults and peers in order to construct meaning and knowledge. Then in all probability the surrounding world will contradict this meaning and knowledge and bring the child into processes through which new meaning is created. In other words learn processes.

If the child through this processes changes his or her action and behavior and also gets a new understanding, we can use the word *learning*. Learning is a mental process which happens inside the child. The child's learning can be conscious or more spontaneous/unconscious (Broström, 1998). But regardless of the form of learning you might say, nearly always children are learning. Sometimes because children spontaneous interact with people and objects, and sometime because they have been involved in a teaching process.

Regardless of reading aloud and storytelling is seen as teaching or just as being together, probably there is an agreement about the point: children have to listen to stories. Through this they experience the manifold gallery of characters from the stories. For instance referring to Sanne's story, we met a princes, a king, robbers and pirates. More the children become familiar with many themes and subjects, for example: the boy who lost his way in the forest, or the princess who was kidnapped of the dragons. Finally they learn some methods and structures to construct a story. For example: first something dramatic happens, then the hero solves the problem.

This is a learning process, both because the child most often combines some of the

content in a brand new way and generally with reference to his or her own life, but also because the child appropriates some methods to construct a story: Among other things the structure of a story.

The structure in children's story

Children become storytellers through telling stories. However, unfortunately some adults only appreciate children's stories when they have achieved a certain level of structure. For instance the story has a beginning, then some logical sequences of actions resulting in formulation of a dramatic problem, which finally is solved by the hero. But the young children's stories are not in agreement with such a structure. The adults have to appreciate "less good" stories, stories without an action of order.

According to Pitchner and Prelinger (1978) three characteristics should be present in order to speak about a story:

- it has a title or a starting form
- it has an ending form
- there is a use of the past

In a Danish analyze 70% of 2 years old children used minimum one of these criteria, and the half of the 5 years old children used all three criteria (Aller, 1995, p. 69).

In a genuine story behind the concrete words and sentences there is a depth structure, which keep the story together. According to a theory of narrative structuralism the structure of a story can be described through five levels:

- A starting position with balance and peace (there was a cottage in the forest…)
- The peace is destroyed, a break appear, a problem is formulated (the father became ill…)

- A period with chaos, and an attempt to solve the problem and re-establish the peace and harmony (two of the sons went to the forest in order to...)
- a phase with re-establishment where the unrest removes (the third son killed the troll...)
- a new balance arise, a final situation where a new quality comes up (the poor but brave boy were married with the princes)

Young children do not mange such a complex and logical structure. Like this maybe some adults (but nobody in this room) do not value following story in a positive way told of 5 years old Marlene:

> There was a girl named Anna, and so she walked down the road, because you have to move - just as my grandfather, because he has been at hospital and because he is old.

At present time this storyteller has not learned some basic narrative structures. But through listen to stories step by step the child will learn, that a story has a beginning, an action or a plot, and a conclusion. According to Vygotsky such a type of a story is defined as *focused chains*. A Danish analyze (Aller, 1995) shows, that the half of 5 years old children manage such a telling structure. 20% of 5 years old children have learned an elaborated structure: a genuine storytelling where there is a logical relation between the single sequences, and where these give sense to the whole.

This can faintly be seen in following story told by four year old Freja (4.4 years). Here we see a starting form, a row of actions, and an ending. More we see the outline of the genuine stories five level:

> Once there was a wolf, who lived far off from his Mum, and then the

father arrived, then they returned to the Mum. Now it is over.

I think the problem is expressed through the sentence "The wolf lived far off from his Mum". Before she expressed the problem and the dramatic climax, she solved this underlying problem saying: "Then the father arrived, then they returned to the Mum." (In this way Freja solved the problem).

Louise aged 5 years has learned to construct a story with dramatic episodes and too with a hero as problem-solver:

> Once there was a girl, who lived in a forest, then she met a wolf who brought her to the wolf cubs. And then next day the wolf ate the little girl, but it was only the Mum who did it, but the girl's mother returned and she could not at all find the girl. Then she heard somebody snore. This was the wolf. Then her Mum picked her sick bag and then cut through the wolf's paunch, and then they ran home.

The story starts with harmony (1), which is broken by the wolf (2). Now chaos is coming up, which is calmed down by help of the formulation: "But it was only the Mum who did it" (4). The harmony is reconstructed, when the girls mother cut the wolf's paunch (4), and at a new balance is coming up, when they ran away (5).
Probably Louise has listened to many stories. Perhaps the story of *The wolf and the seven kids*, and maybe also *Little Red Ridinghood*. Stories which the girl has adapted, understood and reproduced in an original and independent way.

Another girl, Line aged 6.4 years, is enrolled in kindergarten class in school. Here they listen to stories, they often play puppet theater and carry through dramatizations. All activities which inspire the children's play and too their own storytelling. Here Line's fairy tale titled *The knight who got some friends*:

Once there was a knight, who owned everything what is worth owning, but was without friends. He send for an old hunter and asked him to set out in the world and seek out somebody he could make friends with. He crossed a big bridge. Here he met a troll and asked: "Do you know where I can find friends?". "Sure, but first you have to solve three tasks. The first one is, you have to stay under water for two hours, without to come up. The second task is to walk through the ghost-castle, called The Old Castle. The third task is to show, that you are a real hunter." As the very first thing the boy tried the first task. He cheated having oxygen cylinder on his bag. Afterwards doing this task, he marched to the ghost-castle. But at first he bought a gun, shoot the ghost, who tried to frightened him, but he was not afraid of ghosts.

Then he walked to the village, showed people he had bought a gun, and now they thought he was a hunter. Then he returned to the troll at the bridge. Here he got a mermaid friend and a princess friend. Then he returned in order to have a giant party. More the hunter returned to the knight in order to pass over his new friends. Then they lived safely the rest of their days.

In an active way Line uses a row of means from the fairy tales: a problem has to be solved, a person sets out in the wide world. Here the troll gives three tasks, which is solved in a very cunning way, which resulted in a very happy ending. The fairy tale shows, that she has learned to build up a story. She is master of a storytelling-structure.

Many of the received stories has elements from the fairy tales. The Russian folk story researcher Vladimir Propp (1958) sets up 31 "functions" or typical

characteristics, which often is present in the folk story tales. In Lines story about the knights several of these is present. Among other which is seen in the list of Propp's (1958):

- a family member leaves the home
- a prohibition is set up
- the prohibition is broken
- the villain ask questions to the hero
- the villain gets some information
- the villain tries to deceive or fool the hero

Through listen to stories and telling stories in his or her own way step by step the child appropriates such a storytelling structure. But also through goal-directed communication with the children the educators can help children to capture the structures and means of the stories.

When children are familiar with a variety of stories, and too themselves has produced stories, this form the basis of more directly to have a dialogue on the structures and means of the fairy tale. Starting from the children's own experiences on fairy tales and stories, they themselves are able to formulate the rules of the fairy tale. Not in an organized and adult logical manner, and not only verbalized. But in co-operation with the educator and peers, and by help of many means of expressions, for instance drawing, painting and play, the child will be able to formulate the systematism of the fairy tale.

Like this Line express some rules of the fairy tale in the early mentioned fairy tale titled *The knight who got some friends:*

Line has learned *the structure* of the fairy tale: The story starts at home, in known and safely conditions: "Once there was a knight". Then a problem is expressed: "He had no friends." After this the main character sets out in the wide world in order to

solve the problem. In Line's story the hunter entered in the knight's place, and through several episodes the hero is exposed to danger, but using courage and tricks he overcame all of them, whereupon he returned and they all lived happily.

More the children learn to use the magic *figure 3*, for instance the hero is the third son, or he gets 3 wishes, or has to solve 3 tasks. Often this figure 3 helps the children to structure their storytelling. In Lines story the hunter had to solve three tasks in order to receive help to gain friends.

Also the children become familiar with using *contrasts*, for example the two stuck-up brothers and the hearty and unspoiled little brother, or the beautiful princess and the evil and ugly stepmother or witch. In Line's story this element is faint expressed in the shape of the good hunter and the dangerous ghost-castle.

Children's play and storytelling

Through listing to stories of the culture and too producing stories themselves, the children gain an insight into peoples' life, in values and norms, and they get inspiration and courage to act in life. More the themes, problems and solutions from the stories contribute to the contents of the children's play - and too their play feed their storytelling(Broström, 1996a).

The story and the children's role play follow the same patterns. For instance some boys agree on to play police and robbers. They have chosen a theme, which correspond to the child's decision on the theme of the story, for example Line's theme: how to get friends. In both cases the children have an idea, which will structure the play and the story.

When the play theme is decided, the boys discuss and negotiate the division of the roles: which of us can be the policeman. The storyteller takes a similar decision, for example Louise decided some roles in her story: a girl, a wolf, some wolf kids and the girl's mother.

After division of the roles in the role play a new phase comes into existent: The children define that situation within which the roles will be realized. Or with the psychologist Elkonin's (1988) concept: The imaginary play situation. Like this a boy says: "Then we said, that the policemen's motor cycles is waiting here." And another boy points at a small room saying: And then the jail was here." Corresponding in the story the storyteller describes some parts of the environment, within which the characters are acting. For example Line describes, or at least mentioned, the bridge and the ghost-castle.

In the police play the boys are ready to plan those play actions, which they will carry out. One of them suggests he will ride the motor cycle using horn and wink. "Oh yes", the other boy says, and supplements: "And then you saw me crack a crib in the bank." "Sure, and then I caught you and put you into jail." Like this the children plan a row of play sequences. In a way the write a manuscript, which form the basis of the play and too is a tool to rule the play.

Some corresponding is seen in Line's story. This is also build up by means of a row of sequences: The hunter sets out in the wide world, he meets the troll, gets three tasks, which he solves by help of tricks and courage.

Elkonin (1988) shows how children's role play is based on a plot, which is defined as "reflection on certain actions, events and relations from the surroundings, which children express in play." The very same happens in children's storytelling.

Because of this identity it might be hypothesized, that children's play experiences will strength their storytelling, which again will influence their play competence. Probably the competent storyteller also masters play competence and too is very much sought after in play.

Analyze

Through a analyze of the children's stories Sutton-Smith's (1981) thesis will be

discussed: the structure in children's stories are in accordance with the structure of the folk tales. Or will the children go beyond this. In accordance with the concept expanding learning (Bateson, 1972, Engeström, 1987) you might hypothesize, that new elements will appear from below.

The analyze is carried through according to following approaches: Some common themes, the roles, the context, the telling structure and the plot.

The through themes

On the basis of a previous analyze of play, and a temporary analyze of a big amount of children's stories, some general themes seem to be present.

Power. I a role play with father, mother and child the roles can be seen as a power relation: The role of the mother is characterized by correcting and scolding, which often is focused towards the role of the baby, which is shifting between being little and asking for care, and on the other hand defiant, obstinate and rebellious. Such a power relation is seen in many folk stories, e.g. in the story of *Cinderella* the two sisters push Cinderella around and treat her like a dog.

The good versus the wicked is a theme too, which characterizes the folk stories. With reference to Åse Enerstvedt (1997) the Russian folk story researcher Vladimir Propp (1958) shows, that the content of the folk stories consist of dyads of wickedness versus lifting of wickedness or distress versus lifting of distress. Such themes can be understood widely. Thus the theme of wickedness can be seen as missing friends, which was expressed in Lines stories about the knights, without friends.

More Propp point out the themes *attack and defense* plus *chase and run away*. Such a theme was for example seen in the boys police play, and too in Louise's story about the wolf, which brought the girl to the hollow.

The roles

When children in play and storytelling express above mentioned themes they create a number of roles. For example the theme on chase and being chased is expressed in the police play. In Line's story with the wolf the theme about the good versus the wicked is expressed through the role of the girl and the wolf.

The context

Being able to carry through a complex role play children define that situation within which the role will be realized, or with other words they define the context of the play. As earlier described the boy in the police play pointed out where the jail was situated, and in Lines story there was some few context descriptions, for example she mentioned the ghost castle and the bridge. However, such context descriptions is rather poor.

The plot in children's stories

Sutton-Smith (1981) refers to Maranda & Maranda (1970), which sets up a model describing the plot in children's stories. The temporary analyze seem to show, that an amount of the stories are spread among all four levels. However, a big number of stories are constructed in accordance with level four:

- At a first level one power conquers another power, which do no attempt to defense. This is seen in Louise's story about the wolf, which brought the girl to the wolf's cave. In children's play such an element is seen in many catching play, for example the police locks the thief in prison.
- At the next level the subordinate power tries to defense himself, but without success. The police catches the thief, he tries to escape the prison, but he is captured again.
- At level three the subordinate power succeeds to neutralize the origin

threat. For example the prisoner escapes.

- At level four and last level the subordinate power succeeds to neutralize the threat and also to change the circumstances. For example the poor boy kills the monster, saves the princess and becomes king himself. Children loves to play such themes, for example *The Beauty and the Beast*. Such a plot is seen in Lines' story of getting friends. The problems is beaten, and the hunter gets friends to the knight.

At all four levels we can recognize the dyads described by Propp (1958): wickedness versus lifting of wickedness or distress versus lifting of distress.

The structure of the story

An analyze of a number of stories seem to show a progress in children storytelling:

- stories with a bunch of not related sentences
- stories which are constructed by help of sequences which partly are connected: focused chains
- stories with an elaborated structure: a logical relation between single sequences, which gives sense to the whole, and with use of several roles, a number of themes, and expressing a plot and with that using "the bridge of the action" (a starting problem, actions with problem solving, and finally an ending which create a new situation).
- a personal story

Conclusion

Our temporary analyze seem to show, that children's play and storytelling consist some shared elements, but also differences. Hopefully the future analyze will give more detailed results. However because of some identity between play and

storytelling, you might hypothesize, that children with play competence also are good storytellers, - an vice versa..

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